

Chapter 1

The sun sets so quickly in Howland that the people who live there have no word for evening. One minute the sky is blue or cloud gray, the next minute it is black, as though someone has thrown a heavy blanket over the earth. Nowhere is the sky darker or the night longer than Dour County, a hatchet-shaped region on Howland's western border. A swift river runs through Dour County. Slippery cliffs overhang the river. An icy sea roils off the coast. But worse than these is the forest that grows to the north. No roads mark the forest and no human footprints. Like the dark, it has lives of its own.



“Nonsense! After seven centuries, you think the moon is going to show its face for you? Come away from there now and set the table.”

Annie Trewitt took a small step back from the window. She had seen pictures of the moon in books, copied from older pictures in older books, copied from the oldest books of all. There

were the skinny crescent moons, the half-shadow moons, the regular full moons. And then there were the Howler moons, round and orange and edible looking, even on the page.

“I told you, come away!” Aunt Prim shoved a stack of clean dishes into Annie’s hands and reached past her to fasten the shutters. “If it’s the kinderstalk you’re peeping after they’d better be worth a whipping.” She paused dramatically. “He *will* catch you one of these days.”

Annie followed her aunt’s gaze over to the chair where her uncle was enjoying his third nap of the day. Drool snaked in a clear line from the corner of his mouth to the collar of his shirt. Around one finger he wore a battered tin cup like a ring, a little residue of whisky at the bottom.

Annie set three bowls on the table, three spoons, and three cups. A fourth set of dishes sat on the shelf, untouched. The insides of the bowls had been scrubbed to a smooth gray finish, exactly the color of the porridge that filled them at every meal. She poured milk from an ewer into each of the cups, careful first to spoon the cream into a separate dish for her uncle’s dessert.

Aunt Prim’s voice sounded close at her ear. “Mind your uncle well tonight, hear me, girl?”

Annie nodded, but Aunt Prim crowded closer, her lips nearly touching Annie’s cheek. She smelled of cotton, milk, and dust.

“Do you hear me, girl? Do you hear me warning you?”

“Yes, Aunt Prim, I hear you.”

“And you can’t say I didn’t warn you, can you?”

“No, I can’t say you didn’t warn me.”

“Swear to it, then.”

Swear to it? Annie glanced sharply at her aunt. She looked herself—long and dry and pointed, like a rib bone—and also not herself. Her eyes were bright, and a little frizz of hair stood up around her face.

“Do you swear?” Aunt Prim repeated, but before Annie could swear, or pretend to swear, Uncle Jock woke up.

Waking took a long time for a man as big as Uncle Jock: first the feet twitched, then the knees, then the hands, and finally the long chin lifted off the chest. He sniffed the air.

“Come to table, dear,” Aunt Prim said. “You know you don’t like your supper cold.”

If waking was slow, standing was slower. Annie had plenty of time to scoop porridge from the big iron cooking pot into each bowl, then add pickled vegetables and salt pork from the jars her aunt had replenished that day in the shed. Uncle Jock’s bowl was twice the size of the others and Annie filled it to the brim. She heard the floorboards creak and then he was standing beside her, massive as a mountain that had torn itself up from the ground. But he was solid, not fat; he could move fast enough when he wanted.

“Jane came past today,” Aunt Prim said as they took their seats. “The Woeforts’ new cow was taken last night. That’s not more than a stone’s throw from here.”

Uncle Jock grunted.

“They’d just finished the fence around the barn, too. Twelve feet high, Jane said, spiked all along the top. Not so

much as a hoof left in the yard.” Her eyes slid over to her husband. He was digging at something in his ear with the long dirty nail of his pinkie finger. “Something *was* left behind, however.”

Uncle Jock stopped digging. Aunt Prim smiled and took up her spoon.

“Well?”

Aunt Prim nibbled her oats.

“Well?” Uncle Jock banged the table with his fist. Porridge slopped over the side of his bowl.

Aunt Prim leaned forward. A pulse beat at the base of her throat. “A tuft of hair.”

“A tuft of . . . what color was it?”

“What *color*?”

“Yes, woman! What color?”

Aunt Prim frowned, all coyness gone. “That’s odd, you know, I thought Janie must be joking when she said it, but now . . .”

“*What color!*”

“White! She said it was white.”

Uncle Jock became very still. From the corner of her eye, Annie could see his lips puff in and out. After a moment he picked up his spoon and began to shovel porridge into his mouth. Annie had managed only a few bites when he pushed his empty bowl away, stretched, and let out a tremendous belch.

“Primmy my gal, I’m still as hungry as a bear.”

Aunt Prim raised her eyebrows.

“And do you know what I fancy, my very own Primrose?”

Aunt Prim raised her eyebrows a notch farther.

“Haddock.”

Annie's heart sank. Aunt Prim's mouth, which was long without being wide, flattened even more. But all she said was, "Girl, go down the hall and get your uncle some fish."



Aunt Prim stored the fish with the dry goods in a shed off the back of the house. What she called the hall was really just a pile of boards slapped together and nailed at the top into a triangular crawl space. All the farms in Dour County were built like this, the sheds and outhouses connected to the main buildings through closed walkways or tunnels. No one kept more food indoors than was needed for a single day, and those foolish enough to try raising livestock built their barns as far from the main house as possible.

Annie squatted down to unbolt the door to the passage. An ax hung over the door and she caught her reflection in the polished blade: dark eyebrows, blank face. Aunt Prim handed her a single match from the tin matchbox.

The bare ground felt cold and foreign under her palms. Even with the light spilling in from the main room, the darkness of the passage shocked her; it seemed she wasn't moving through the dark so much as being swallowed by it. Every few feet she paused, listening. It was odd, what Aunt Prim had said about the white fur. Everyone knew that kinderstalk were black. Black to match the night. She shivered. They kept a lantern in the shed, of course, but the light from the house never reached quite far enough, and Annie spent a moment in awful, fumbling darkness before she heard the match strike.

Though she hated getting there, the shed itself she liked.

The walls began a few feet below ground, which made it cool in summer and warm, or at least not frigid, in winter. Bags filled with oats sagged against each other and against bins of salt, onions, and lard. There was a barrel full of the misshapen potatoes that still grew, somehow, in the blighted yard. Thin strips of fish hung drying from the rafters, next to bunches of sage and rosemary. As the fish dried they shed scales that coated the floor in a stinking, shimmering dust.

Annie chose a big piece of fish for her uncle, then two smaller ones, wrapping them carefully in a scrap of cloth before tucking them into one of the many pockets of her dress. The dress she was wearing was two years old and ridiculously small, but Annie refused to give it up. Page had made it for her, sewing by lamplight in the swallowing darkness while Annie slept beside her. The dress had dozens of pockets: some wide and flat for long-stemmed plants, some narrow and deep for rocks or shells. There were obvious pockets, and then inside the obvious pockets there were secret ones. There were pockets in the lining of the dress that only Annie could ever get to, pockets in the armpits, pockets in the hem. The dress was so perfect for her, for her habits of observing and collecting and hiding, that at first she had hated it. How could Page know her so well? What was the point of a secret compartment if Page only had to look at her to guess what was in it? Then Page died, and Annie had worn the dress every day since.

The passage was easier to manage on the way back, with the light coming through the open door to guide her. She had almost reached the door when she heard her aunt's voice.

“Annie? Annie girl? Are you there?”

Annie hesitated. She could see the outlines of her aunt’s face and the tight, small bun she wore framed by a square of orange firelight.

“Annie dear?”

The hair on Annie’s arms prickled. She eased backward a few feet.

Aunt Prim chirped her name again, and then said in her regular voice, “She’s still in the shed.”

Uncle Jock’s legs came into view, his big knees level with Aunt Prim’s shoulder.

“Can’t you shut the door, just to be sure?”

“Oh, Jock, come now. The fright would kill her.”

He chuckled. “A little thing like the dark?”

Uncle Jock bent down and peered into the passage. Even in silhouette, Annie could make out the heavy flaps of skin that hung from his neck and jaws. His . . . what had Page called them? His *dewlaps*.

“Not a lively kind of a girl, is she? Not like the other one.”

Uncle Jock placed a hand on top of his wife’s head and levered himself upright. “I sent word. Everything’s set.”

“Jock, are you sure? She’s strong for her age, and like you say, not too clever. In a few years she could take over the cutting.”

“It’s done.”

Aunt Prim put a hand to her hair, neatening the bun that Uncle Jock had squashed. Then she stood and moved out of sight. Annie crept forward, straining to hear her next words.

“I made a promise to Helen.”

For a few moments all Annie heard was the squeak of the pump drawing water from the well into the sink, then the faint splashing sounds of her aunt washing her hands. When her uncle spoke again, his voice was almost . . . Annie winced. Almost tender.

“Primrose, it was only a matter of time. He’s run us clean out.”

“But the Drop, Jock? Such a waste.”

They moved farther away then, their voices growing muffled. Annie had stopped listening in any case. The Drop. They were sending her to the Drop, and she would die there.



Every night after dinner the three of them followed the same routine. Aunt Prim ironed the laundry, Uncle Jock cleaned his rifle, and Annie scraped out the cooking pot. Normally this was a chore Annie hated, but tonight she was glad for the chance to hide her face inside the pot and think.

She’d waited another few minutes out in the passage, then, making as much noise as possible, crawled back into the room. If she hadn’t been so frightened it would have amused her to see them arranged around the table just as before, her aunt polishing an invisible stain with her rag, her uncle scowling into his bowl. The rest of the meal had passed as usual, only now Annie read some secret communication into each scrape of her aunt’s spoon, each wheeze of her uncle’s breath. More than anything, she wanted Page to be there. Page would have known what to do.

The fire had died to embers by the time Annie's head and shoulders emerged from the pot. Uncle Jock had long since finished cleaning his rifle, and having restored it to its place by the head of the bed, had restored himself to his place by the fire and begun to snore.

Annie straightened abruptly, preparing to return the pot to its shelf. As she did, she bumped into Aunt Prim, who was crossing the room with a pile of freshly ironed breeches. The pile swayed for a moment as if deciding whether or not to fall, then toppled to the dirt floor. In an instant, Annie was on her knees.

"Get away! You'll only make them dirtier." Aunt Prim shoved Annie aside with her hip and bent to reach for a pair of breeches. As she leaned forward a small book fell out of her pocket. The two of them stared at it, then at each other. For the briefest moment it looked as if Aunt Prim was going to cry. Instead, she snatched up the book and shoved it back in her pocket, but not before Annie saw that the margins were filled with notes written in Page's tiny, precise hand.

"Out! Get out of my sight, you clumsy girl!"

Uncle Jock shifted in his chair. Aunt Prim clamped her lips together and jabbed a bony finger in the direction of the ladder that led up to Annie's garret room. Annie scurried up it, but after she had crawled into the garret and let the trapdoor slam behind her, she silently opened it again, just a crack. She watched her aunt glance at her uncle, still sleeping, then cross to the bed and slip the book between the mattress and the frame.

Annie let the door down gently. She walked to the window and peered out. Her face peered back at her. In daylight she had a view of the privy roof, and beyond that a fence, a field of stumps, and finally the dark wall of trees that formed the forest's southern edge. It was bad luck to put a window facing the forest. Everyone knew that. But her father had built this part of the house, so she didn't like to think of it as a mistake.

The garret had been their parents' bedroom. A wooden cradle stood under the eaves, used first by Page and then, five years later, by Annie. And now . . . Annie reached down and lifted out the warm, limp body of an orange cat. Isadore hated to be held, but when he was asleep she could pretend for a few moments that he liked it. She sat down on the only other piece of furniture in the room, a mattress facing a row of empty shelves. Their parents had owned dozens of books on every subject: geography, agriculture, medicine, folk stories, woodworking. Some of the books were handmade, the bindings sewn together with heavy thread. Others were bound in shiny leather with gold letters stamped on the front. There was a *History of Mining* and a *Guide to Weaponry*, a bestiary and a giant dictionary with a tattered red cover. There was a grammar of ancient Frigic, a cookbook devoted to the preparation of grubs, a volume of love poetry. Page read them all. She had hurt her ankle as a baby and it never healed properly, so she scooted herself from sink to fire to ironing board on a stool with runners fastened at the ends of the legs, like a sleigh. As soon as she finished her chores each day she would make her way to the garret to read. She read her way through the volumes stacked in wobbly

towers around their little room, moving each book from the unread to the read pile after she finished it. When she had finished them all, she started again from the beginning, making a new pile for books read twice, then another for books read three times, and so on. After Page died, Uncle Jock had come into the garret and taken away all of her books and clothing. "Fever," he said, and burned them along with the body.



Annie released the now wide-awake and squirming Isadore. Immediately, a brown striped cat climbed into her lap. Annie scratched her ears.

"Prudence, *you* are an excellent cat." She unwrapped a piece of fish and flapped it in Isadore's direction before feeding it to Prudence. "*He* should learn to be nicer to the Holder of the Haddock." Izzy flicked his tail.

"Yes, yes, here's yours."

After a while she blew out the lantern and crawled under the blankets to wait. Orange light came in through the cracks in the chimney stones. The garret was always smoky, but at least it was never completely dark. When at last she heard something it wasn't any of the familiar sounds that meant her aunt and uncle were preparing for bed.

Someone was knocking at the front door of the cottage.

Impossible. The sky had been dark for hours now. But there were her uncle's heavy footsteps crossing the room and the sound of the door being unbarred and quickly opened, then just as quickly shut and barred again. There was a subdued babble

of voices, then more footsteps and the sound of benches being scraped back at the table. A man was speaking. Uncle Jock, or the visitor? She couldn't make out the words.

Once more, Annie eased open the trapdoor. The room below was red with firelight. A man sat at the table across from Uncle Jock. His back was to her, but she could see that he had narrow shoulders and a pointed head covered by wisps of straw-colored hair. Uncle Jock poured himself and the other man a cupful of whisky. Aunt Prim sat in the chair by the fire mending a pair of socks. She made a big show of measuring and snapping off thread, but Annie knew she was listening.

Uncle Jock was doing most of the talking. He finished his drink quickly and poured himself another. A musket leaned against the table by the strange man's side. From time to time he caressed it absently, as though it were a pet dog. Uncle Jock poured himself a third drink. He began to wave his hands around in big gestures, his eyebrows raising and lowering dramatically. She caught a few of his words: *strong*, *sorry*, *worth*, *quarry*. Suddenly Uncle Jock laughed and pounded his fist on the table.

"It's a deal, then!" he cried. The other man reached out and laid his hand over Uncle Jock's. It was a light touch, almost gentle, but a spasm of fear crossed Uncle Jock's face.

"Not like the first," the man said. "I want the living child."

Uncle Jock managed the barest of nods. Before releasing it, the man gave Uncle Jock's hand a couple of soft pats. *There, there.*

Uncle Jock snatched back his hand and rubbed it with the other hand as if to warm it.

The man rose to leave.

“Wait! You wanted to know about anything unusual, right? Any odd marks?”

“On the girl? Yes.”

“Not on the girl, but . . .” Uncle Jock spoke in a rush. “Kinderstalk got into the neighbor’s yard and left behind a tuft of white fur.” He looked up hopefully. “That’s unusual, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. Any signs in your own yard?”

“My yard! No, none. None at all.”

The man drew a purse from his pocket and shook out a handful of ringstones. Even from her perch, Annie could see that they were high quality, perfectly smooth and bright white. He took a single stone from the pile and poured the rest back into the bag. He placed the stone in front of Uncle Jock.

“To whet your appetite.” He paused. “If anyone asks, kinderstalk took the girl.”



The visitor paused on the threshold to light his lantern. Cold black air blew into the cottage. Then, quickly, he turned back toward the room, as if he had just remembered something. For the first time, Annie saw his face. She gasped, a tiny sound, but his head jerked toward her, and for a second their eyes seemed to meet. Then he smiled, the lipless mouth opening onto two rows of perfectly square white teeth.

“A good night to you,” he said, and stepped out into the darkness.

Uncle Jock lunged at the door and slammed it shut.

Aunt Prim looked up from her mending. “When, Jock?”

“Tomorrow.”

Aunt Prim nodded. “When she’s finished her morning chores.”



Firelight colored the room a vivid orange. Deep shadows gathered in the corners where the light didn’t reach.

Annie stood with one hand on the ladder. She could still climb back up, climb back into bed and curl up with the cats and wait for daylight to make sense of things. But daylight wouldn’t bring sense, only the Drop. She thought of her old friend Gregor. Annie had been on her way to his house with a gift for his ninth birthday: a rock impressed with a bird’s footprint; some kind of gull, she thought, though Gregor would know for certain. A wagon had passed her going the opposite way, and she remembered thinking it odd that they had put up the rain cover in clear weather. When she reached his house she found his mother standing alone in the yard, weeping. Later, over dinner, Aunt Prim told her, “I have bad news for you. The kinderstalk have eaten that friend of yours. Last night. They ate his shoes, everything. Now, no crying. It’s a fact of life we must all accept.”

“But I saw . . .,” Annie began, but Page caught her eye and shook her head.

Later, Annie lay with her head in Page's lap. "Did the kinderstalk really eat Gregor?"

"Monsters got him, I can tell you that much. But not you. I won't let them get you."

Annie still had the gull rock, pocketed in the hem of her dress. It kept the skirt from blowing around in strong winds.



She would need to be ready before her morning chores. And because she had never, in all her life, managed to wake up earlier than Aunt Prim, that meant she needed to be ready tonight. The only food she could find was a handful of dusty rinkle nuts that her aunt had been threatening to cook for a month. Now: money, rifle, and then the last, the most important, thing.

Of course the trunk was locked, but Annie hadn't lived twelve years in this house without learning a thing or two. Aunt Prim kept the key in *The Book of Household Virtues*, tucked between page 786, "Vinegar in the Use of Removing Blood Stains," and page 787, "Vinegar in the Use of Curing Barn-foot." When Page was alive, Aunt Prim used to make them sit after dinner and listen to recipes, medical cures, or worst of all, favorite sayings:

Hard work and no complaints turns chaff into wheat.

Quiet mouse gets the apple; noisy mouse chews the pip.

If a cow wanders into the yard, be quick to shut the gate.

Always, before she closed the book, Aunt Prim turned to the page in the back where she wrote down the names of

children eaten by kinderstalk: Phoebe Tamburlaine was the first, followed by Cowley Crawford, Meg Winters, Walter Rout, and on and on until the last, Gregor Pepin. Annie couldn't resist looking at the page now. To her surprise, there were more than a dozen new names added after Gregor's. Beside each name Aunt Prim had printed the date of death and another number. Gregor's number was nine, the same as most of the children listed before him. But the numbers beside the children listed after him got smaller and smaller, and the dates of their disappearances closer and closer together. The last name was Minnie Wythe, taken a month past, age three.



The trunk was nailed to the floor at the foot of her aunt and uncle's four-poster. Aunt Prim slept in the narrow slice of bed between Uncle Jock and the wall. Uncle Jock's huge feet, kicked free from the blankets, gave off a smell of wet wool. Annie knelt in front of the trunk and eased the lid open. Linen. But underneath the linen was hidden a smaller chest, tightly buckled with leather straps. She had seen it once before.

Aunt Prim had stepped out to the privy; Uncle Jock was off cutting.

"Annie, quick, I want to show you something." Page was kneeling over the trunk, her face flushed.

"What is it?"

"Proof."

The ringstone was beautiful, most of it a soft brilliant

pink, with some stones reflecting mauve and green tones. Colored stone was less valuable than white, but Annie thought it much nicer to look at.

“Proof of what?” Annie whispered.

“That Uncle Jock is as bad as we think. There’s Aunt P. Hurry!”



Annie opened the chest. *I’ll only take what I need. Only a few, and only the darkest.* But there was nothing inside. Not one stone. She looked around the spare cottage in disbelief. Had he spent it all? There had been enough stone in that chest to buy a farm like Uncle Jock’s twice over.

There was nothing else of value in the cottage. Nothing, unless—did she dare?

Every night before bed Uncle Jock dropped his clothes on the floor and put on his long underwear, and every night Aunt Prim picked up his clothes and put them away in the dresser.

After the man left, Uncle Jock had poured himself another drink and patted his knee.

“Come here, Prim, and have a look at this.” He held the white ringstone up to the light. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Aunt Prim put aside her sewing, but she sat on the bench, not his lap.

“It’s so beautiful!” She smiled, and almost looked beautiful herself. “It’s how I imagine a star might look. A fallen star.”

She reached for the ringstone but Uncle Jock raised it over his head.

“Tut, tut, Primmy. This is my special burden.”

Aunt Prim scowled. “Is it from the Drop?”

“Could be. Awfully fine for the Drop, though. Awfully fine.”

“What did he mean about whetting your appetite, Jock? This was to be the end of it.”

“We’ll be free, my wild Primrose. We’ll be free.” Then he kissed not his wife but the stone, and tucked it into his front shirt pocket.

It would be easy enough for Annie to get his shirt from the dresser and the white ringstone from the pocket of his shirt, except for one thing. Uncle Jock had made the dresser, and Uncle Jock was as lazy about carpentry as everything else. The drawers squeaked.

He’s had five cups of whisky at least. Five cups! That should keep him snoring. Still, Annie’s heart beat faster as she eased open the first drawer. Socks and underpants. She tried the second. There it was, neatly folded but still smelling sourly of her uncle.

Aunt Prim was right. The white ringstone was as beautiful as a star, so clear and brilliant she almost expected it to give off heat.

The stone in her pocket made her feel bold and she shut the drawer too fast. The drawer jammed, the dresser shuddered, and *The Book of Household Virtues* toppled to its side with a bang.

Uncle Jock was on his feet in an instant. "Kinderstalk!" he roared, aiming his rifle at the dresser. When he saw Annie standing there he dropped the muzzle.

"You?"

Annie looked at her uncle and then at the book. Her mind said, *What if you miss?* But her hand knew what to do. The book struck him full in the face. He yowled and doubled over. Annie darted past him to the bed and thrust her hand between the mattress and the frame. Her eyes found Aunt Prim's stricken face, then she was across the room and up the ladder to the garret.

Annie half kicked, half dragged the heavy old mattress over the hatch, then stood on it for good measure. But what now? Already Uncle Jock was pounding on the door, lifting the mattress higher with each blow. One hand appeared through the hole. He heaved a shoulder through, then reached around and groped for Annie's ankle. She cried out and leapt clear of him, but soon his head and torso were visible. Annie looked desperately from her uncle to the window and back again.

"Don't you do it, girl!" Uncle Jock shouted. The nose of his rifle emerged through the trapdoor. She had no pistol, no knife, nothing.

Her uncle must have had the same thought, because he began to laugh. Blood trickled from a cut over his eye.

"You're caught now, kitten."

Annie snatched up her cloak and lantern, stuffed her feet into her boots, and threw open the window. Outside, though she couldn't see it, was the steeply slanting roof of the

passageway that led to the privy. Prudence streaked out and Annie wriggled after her. Isadore stayed back. Annie's front end came through all right but her hips stuck in the window frame. Uncle Jock had one knee through the trapdoor now. Desperately, Annie pushed against the window frame with her free hand and kicked with her legs like a swimmer. Still she didn't budge. A hand closed around her ankle. She kicked frantically with the other foot and caught him in the throat. He gasped and coughed and then, with a shout of pain, let go of her leg. Her hips slid through. Before the darkness swallowed her she got a glimpse of orange fur flying and her uncle's fingers pressed to his cheek.



She was outside, after dark. She was *outside*. The roof's sharp peak pressed into her belly. For a long moment she just hung on, too terrified to move. Then a pair of familiar green eyes glinted ahead of her, reflecting the faint light from the garret window. Prudence.

Annie inched along in the direction of the cat. Now she could smell the privy, and feel the flat boards of the privy roof under her hands. Prudence disappeared and Annie stopped, groping forward with one hand. There was the edge of the roof, and the empty air beyond it. Starting at her waist, she walked her fingers carefully up her side until she found them: twenty-two pilfered matches, nestled in a pocket against her rib cage.

The lantern light penetrated no more than a few feet in

any direction, not enough to see the ground below—How far was it? Six feet? Ten?—but enough to see Izzy’s orange forehead and white chin as he came up beside her. She felt the slight disturbance of air as he leapt from the roof. Then she held her breath and jumped after him into the darkness.